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ABSTRACT

"Rural Prairie Women" contains the work of two task forces: the Rural Social Work Task Force which looked at the forces active in North Dakota rural areas and the Rural Women Task Force which examined the position of women within those same rural communities. The relationship between the land, small towns, and sparse population is explored, as is the impact of tradition for both descendants of immigrants and Native Americans. Ways in which change occur are examined to show how change is handled. It is noted that social patterns present in the more recent rural communities bear striking similarities to those long existing among Native Americans. The paper's second part addresses specific concerns of rural North Dakota women: women's roles defined by tradition (wife and mother); local community definition of role expectancy; distinctions between responsibilities and power of husbands and wives; and frustrations arising from emerging role expectations. The role of women within their own families is considered. Changes brought about by new community property and inheritance laws are identified. It is concluded that like other women, equal compensation for comparable work is the basic issue for rural women, and tradition is what all women must overcome wherever they live. (BRR)

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RURAL PRAIRIE WOMEN

This paper is the result of two Task Forces organized by the author through the Minot State College Social Work Program: the Rural Social Work Task Force and the Rural Women Task Force. All participants provide human services in rural North Dakota, and the chapters are a result of their discussions.

Rural prairie women are significant members of their communities and very much defined by the physical and social environment in which they find themselves. Therefore, description of that environment is an essential prerequisite to any presentation of their experience.

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RURAL NORTH DAKOTA COMMUNITIES

Defining rural in North Dakota is an interesting pursuit, as once demographics have been considered, the discussion involves putting form to feelings and experiences. "Concrete", "interdependent" and "agriculture" are specific words which represent the difference between living in "cities" like Bismarck, Mandan, Jamestown and Minot from that of living in communities like Bowbells, Cooperstown and McClusky. The weather and the quality of the land are also major considerations which must be included in any description of the nature of rural life on the prairie. There has been little formal analysis of what constitutes rural in North Dakota. This paper is an effort to open the discussion and to identify aspects of the rural prairie experience.

The lifestyle of rural North Dakotans can, in very specific terms, be seen to be patterned by the physical environment. Because of the shortness of the growing season, the low amount of moisture, and the type of production the land yields, there is a small number of people spread over a wide expanse of land. Their farms and ranches are large compared to other parts of the country. Without the numbers of people farming, the demand for services is limited and does not justify large service centers. Thus, the towns which serve the farmers are small and the people who identify themselves as members of a particular community are spread over a wide area.

The lifestyle of the people in these small towns and the area surrounding them is also greatly influenced by the traditions and values carried from the "old country" or the "olden days". Because of how and where people were settled on the prairie, either by the government on reservations or by the government and the railroads on homesteads, distinctive ethnic groups and Native American tribes dominate specific areas of the State. There are the German-Russian, the Norwegian, the Islandic and the Danish areas, much like there are the Lakota Sioux and the Dakota Sioux reservations. As there has been little movement of people into these areas, this segregation has allowed for a particular group's traditions to be pervasive in the values and the culture in a particular segment of the State.

These communities are farming or ranching communities, and they take on some of the aspects of "company towns" - everyone's employment is dependent on the survival of one business or industry. The difference between a farming town and, for instance, a mining town, however, is that each department or production unit of the industry is owned and/or operated by a different individual or family. As there is no one boss or employer, the individuals and families must work together to find ways of handling

conflicts and getting the work done. Each member is directly or indirectly involved in defining and achieving the common good. Decisions are not in the hands of one person or company. Rather than being economically dependent on the company, the people are interdependent as a community.

All community activities are, generally, suspended during spring and fall's work because of the extra demands and pressures on everyone to be available to help. Whether a person lives in town or in the country, his or her relationships are built upon regular, seasonal encounters outside of these work times and maintained for years even though individuals may only be together sporadically. Because of the infrequency of social occasions and the great distances people must often travel, get-togethers are considered important and worth the effort. Without the populated service centers where entertainment and sociability can be provided commercially, people are left to their collective and individual resources and creativity. If a good time is to be had by all, individuals must be committed to actively participating in the group or the community events. They must also behave within the commonly defined limits.

Usually considered family events, such as weddings, anniversaries and funerals are included with the summer pow-wow, the 4th of July celebration, the harvest dance, and the school Christmas play in any list of community events. As many people are distant cousins or relatives by marriage, these events can draw great numbers of people who are considered family members, as well as friends or neighbors. An occasion involves almost everyone in the area and is a time of elaborate celebration. People are expected as well as expect to participate.

Rural North Dakotans project a sense of being rooted in a place. Because of their economic, social and cultural interdependence, as well as their total dependence on the land, a home area, township or town represents basic and essential parts of each person's identity.

As people are tied to the land either directly or indirectly, they grow up expecting to live in these communities their entire lifetimes. Their relationships and status begin to be determined as they go through the local school or church activities and carry over to adulthood and longer. Knowing someone's personal, as well as family history, can be a fairly accurate explanation of how an individual has gotten to the position in the community he or she has achieved or why an individual may be on the outs with the community.

Having each person's heritage and present identity so intertwined with everyone else's has also resulted in the sense that each community functions as one entity. Each member has a place in the structure of the community and is a part of the whole. Decisions are made informally as the common good is easily identified, the group is small, and formal discussions or decisions have the potential for alienating essential part(s) of the whole.

The uniqueness of the interdependency of these small, rural, prairie communities lies in their segregation, as well as their isolation. Living 4 - 10 people per square mile and expecting to live their whole lives together, people are very visible, familiar and committed to each other. The result is that each community is deciding upon cultural and social behaviors and values within its own informal systems and without many visible outside influences. The vast majority of them have attempted in the past and desire in the future to function as these separate entities and to make these decisions on their own. They handle their problems and expect that the outside world respect their right to do so. Together, they define what is important and what is not.

The dominance of group wisdom and thought can, however, often result in a great deal of pressure on an individual or family not to achieve outside of the community/group's expectations. Having one part of the whole trying new things or ways of living could potentially throw the entire group off balance and create a demand for a response. Thus, the person who feels alienated from the life of the community or is not willing to accept the authority of the group may have some very negative feelings towards the whole situation. In a sense, people are expected to learn about new ways of doing things together. The leaders must eventually sanction the change in the conventional wisdom for it to be accepted. If, however, one individual or family experiences a new or stressful situation, the whole can change and redefine itself. The decision to change the conventional norms or values goes through the informal channels, with the process generally taking a very long time. When change occurs, it is observed to almost "ripple" through the group/community.

As decisions are made in an informal rather than formal way, the outsider or new person in town may sense that there are secrets of which he or she is not privy. The new person must realize that he or she must be accepted by the group before being trusted and included in the informal channels. As adding a new person or group, like other changes, requires adjusting on the part of all, it may take a very long time for someone to achieve a position in the system. Without the personal or family history to attach to this new person or group, it may never happen completely for the person not born in the area.

Formal as well as informal authorities do exist in rural North Dakota. However, they are limited in recognition to the government and the church. These two institutions are respected by the general populas as they, generally, are not in conflict with the informal systems. They are watched carefully by leaders in each community and limited or put in line easily, if necessary. Serving as a citizen or a congregational representative on the commission or the church council is considered an important responsibility and a position of status. Those individuals are chosen to protect the interests of the community.

The responsibilities of the government are clearly laid out in law, and in North Dakota, only interpreted by representatives of the people - judges, sheriffs and state attorneys. Governmental business is handled by elected county (auditors, treasurers, etc.) and state officials (tax commissioner, agriculture commissioner, governor, insurance commissioner, secretary of state etc. etc.). The strong initiative measure system and the consistent rejection of sweeping constitutional revision, also, speak to the clear local control communities and people put on government and their representatives.

The sense of the people that government is representative of the will of the people and is tied to their needs and desires, gives the government the authority and the respect that it has. Strong representative democracy, then, is a key to controlling government. It insures that the government does not interfere in the workings of the informal processes which keep each interdependent community operating. Laws are passed by representatives, interpreted by representatives and carried out by representatives. If the law, the interpretation or the resulting program or rule is not to a group's liking, it can easily be put to a vote of the community, the county or the state.

The rural church has a much different role as a formal structure. It draws its authority from the past as well as the present, and thus, is much more tied to tradition and culture than the government. When people moved to the prairie, most often the first common building they built was a church. As they came and homesteaded in ethnic or racial groups, the religion the group brought with it became the predominant religion of the area. On reservations there also were developed predominant religions. They represent the missionary groups who pursued particular Native tribes. There are also many variations on the same religious denomination. Lutheranism and Catholicism are the predominant religions in North Dakota. However, there are German Lucherans, Swedish Lutherans, Norwegian Lutherans, Islandic Lutherans, and German Catholics, Standing Rock Sioux Catholics, French-Canadian Catholics, German-Russian Catholics. The favorite songs, the traditional prayers and the holidays most celebrated are some of the representations of the past which divide the groups.

The authority of the churches lies in its recognized power to interpret values and to order events which have much to do with defining how people relate to each other. Again, the community, through the church council, has a great deal to say about what is spoken from the powerful pulpit and whether the children are being reared in what is recognized to be the proper church ways. Local people hire the minister and teach in the Sunday School, in the Protestant churches. In the Catholic churches, the people often have some ties to the bishop who chooses the priests. In many small communities, there are priests and ministers who serve several churches. In these cases, the responsibility and the control of the church very much lies with the community.

There is a strong sense of participation in the rural churches. Perhaps because the congregations are small and the visibility of who participates and who does not is high, people attend services and will most often not even do field work on Sundays. There are also many who say that farmers and other rural people take their religion seriously and participate so enthusiastically because of their dependence on the natural elements. Having a strong relationship with the Almighty or the Spirit which controls the rain and the wind may have very concrete and pragmatic meaning to rural people.

The authority of the rural church, therefore, may stem from many different sources. Most importantly, it formally articulates the values of the community and it provides a forum for people to express their insecurity and dependence on factors outside of their control.

This paper has not specifically dealt with any one group, but has rather attempted to describe communities generally, and how people live collectively in them. It must be recognized that the lives and the culture of the Mandan, the Hidatsa, the Arikara, the Dakota Sioux and Lakota Sioux and the Chippewa peoples and their tribal communities are unique to North Dakota. Their cultures and their social structures have had several hundred years to develop on the prairie, within the physical limitations and resources.

It is the author's conclusion that given a long period of time to develop, isolated from the demands of modern technology and societal institutions, the German-Russian, Ukranian, Norwegian, German, Danish, Islandic and Bohemian communities would have social structures similar to the Native Americans. The clan or extended family systems, the strict social norms and mores, the sense of tribal cohesion, the rewarding of achievement with concrete gifts and the mixing of religion and culture are all social patterns which are present in both the Native and the more recent rural communities. Developed to an infant stage in more recent rural communities, they are well developed among the Native Americans. The similarities are striking and deserve to be noted.

Neither the Native American nor the more recent rural communities of the prairie, however, are going to be isolated from the demands of modern technology or social institutions. In the last twenty years there have been tremendous changes and the next decade presents itself with even more. Mineral development and small industrial plants will increase the productive yield of the land and result in new people moving into the rural communities. As the Native Americans learned, with new people and new technology come new ideas and challenges to old ways. If the communities of the prairie are as intertwined as has been presented, the future may be difficult. This paper is an effort to describe the present and to open discussion for clarification and understanding in the future.

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RURAL WOMEN IN NORTH DAKOTA

The rural communities of North Dakota have been described as economically and socially interdependent groupings of people, each group being dominated by a particular ethnic and religious heritage. Through their informal systems the residents make decisions about their collective lives, and through their churches and governmental units they articulate their opinions and needs to the outside world. Within these communities, rural women, like women across the country, are seriously looking at their status and engaging in activities directed towards changing it.

Not presuming to speak for all rural women, the author and the group of women who have contributed to this paper are attempting to describe what these changes involve, in North Dakota. The unequal economic, social and political status which urban and suburban women experience is also the situation in which rural women find themselves. The dynamics of the rural environment, however, result in some specific concerns and issues. This paper addresses these specific concerns in the hope that more clarity and understanding can be gained.

Rural women, like urban and suburban women, find themselves very much defined by tradition. Roles and expectations have been inherited from mothers and transmitted through the words and actions of family and community members. According to these traditions, a woman's status is based upon her performance as wife and mother. There are variations on how these roles are interpreted within the various ethnic communities; however, wife and mother are essentially the job titles for what is considered "women's work". Women aspire to be married and have children and be good at carrying out their responsibilities. If they do not meet the traditionally defined expectations, they can experience a tremendous sense of failure.

Single women, with or without children, experience traditional expectations similar to those of single women in other areas. However, employed single women are more accepted in rural areas and less isolated to a world of single and divorced people. Unemployed, single women do not stay long in a community, unless they can live with relatives or are eligible for Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

The traditional two-parent family of rural North Dakota derives its income from a family farm, a family business or employment in businesses owned by someone else. It continues to be not only a basic social, but also an economic unit, with marriage being a very obvious economic partnership. This is reinforced by the fact that it is unusual to find households where the wife, as well as the husband, cannot define aspects of her life's work as income producing. Wives are doing books, feeding hired men (so the wages can be kept lower), milking cows, moving equipment, or

helping during calving on a farm or ranch; or waiting on customers, typing, or doing inventory in a small business; or raising a garden to sell the produce, working in a local business, houseclearning for other families, taking in laundry or babysitting in the employed family. Women, generally, are part of the family/business work force all their lives. Their labor produces income - it is very visible and concrete and makes the traditional rural "wife" something different from the urban/suburban housewife.

The reins on the definitions of what activities and responsibilities are involved in the job of wife in rural areas are held very tightly by the extended families and the communities. In some areas wives take hot meals to the fields at noon, while in others, wives do not. In some communities wives do all the bookkeeping, while in others, they do not, etc. etc. If a new wife's mother-in-law milks cows, raises chickens or raises a garden and cans preserves, she is expected to be able to do these things as part of her job in the family business. The community and/or the family assign the specific responsibilities to the job, and they must be carried out if it is judged to be a job well done.

The role of mother, in rural areas, is probably not going through as many changes, especially in two parent homes, as in urban or suburban areas. Children have always been more independent in small towns and on farms, because of the safety the rural community affords and the fact that children cannot really get too far from someone who is willing to supervise. Rural women are also not going through the "working mother" transition like mothers in other areas.

Producing needed cash or participating in the family economics has always been an acceptable venture for mothers. Also, their children are not being left with strangers if a babysitter is required. Working "for no reason", however, is looked upon by the community very sceptically. Many married women report that they experience some criticism if they work outside the family business or farm and their husbands earn a "good living". The criticism is that they are filling positions that they "do not need". It is, however, also a criticism that women in urban and suburban areas feel and hear.

The distinctions between the responsibilities and the power of mothers and fathers has depended, again, on the community and the family traditions. Generally, mothers are responsible for infants. Even small children, however, may be the responsibility of fathers, as they are engaged in chores or some other activity where fathers can be the supervisors. Though, no one should misunderstand what is being said and imply that rural mothers have achieved any great status. Mothers are left with the greatest share of the nurturing responsibilities and receive little recognition for it. They are not, however, left alone in their houses with children for many hours. In this sense, motherhood has never been the isolating

and total responsibility that is for women in other areas.

Power within the family also seems to rest upon tradition, although the personalities of the two parents, like in any family are very important. Outside of the family the husband generally speaks for the family. This is not so different from urban or suburban areas, although it has a rather different twist to it in rural areas. As the family is a business entity and the father is the "born executive", he speaks for the business/family in the community. It is much like the executives of any company. They are on the boards and councils which make decisions and protect the interests of the community. Other employees (wives and children) of the business are involved in carrying out community functions, but they generally do not make decisions. This, of course, differs from community to community and family to family, but it is very common to find men on the church council and women playing the organs and teaching church school.

Unlike other areas, the roles of wife and mother, per se, are not necessarily considered to be limiting to the individual woman. It is probably accurate to say that when the personal autonomy to adjust these roles to the particular interest and abilities of the individual woman is possible, and the economic and social rewards of these roles are elevated to that of husband and father, many rural women can expect a significant increase in their status. This potential is not, however, recognized and the value of wives is certainly not presently being translated into status or decision-making power.

Feelings about their unequal status are obvious as one more frequently hears wives making statements about their partnerships like: "I do the books, but he decides whether we can afford a new tractor"; "I need a new stove, but we spent the money on a new sign for the cafe"; or "I better not run out of laundry soap, but he can go to town whenever he needs something for the machinery". And frustration with bankers who talk to the husband about the loans, when both partners must sign the papers, is beginning to surface. It is not unlike the secretaries' frustration in the movie "9 to 5". Tradition says that men are born to be executives and women are born to be support staff, satisfied to serve others without questioning.

The frustration caused by traditional definitions of "women's work" within families or communities is especially apparent among women who move from one community to another. More women are going to college and meeting, marrying, and going home with men from another town or finding employment in other than their home area. When these women arrive in the new "home" communities, they often find people having different definitions and expectations for what they can and cannot,

or should or should not do. They often feel that these definitions are unreasonable or "out-of-line" compared to their definitions. The jobs for which they prepared themselves are not necessarily the jobs they find themselves doing. The result is that the definition of "wife" is becoming more flexible, especially in "mixed marriages". If it is not, there is probably a great deal of conflict at home or within the extended family or the community.

Uneasiness between the new and changing women and the women who have lived within the community's traditional expectations their whole lives seems to exist. Each group is apprehensive about what they can expect from the other. They seem to be almost dancing around the question of who is going to made the adjustments, once everything is sifted out. Both the "non-traditional women" and the "oldtimers" do, however, know that they can expect their lives to be very intertwined with each others', probably their whole lifetimes. Thus, the negotiations between them are very delicate and require careful handling.

With few professional or career possibilities in small towns, the unique situation of rural women is that they are often left to assert themselves within their families. It is probably because a woman's struggle for equal status is very much a struggle within the family, not only as family members but also as members of the family/business work force, that the word "traditional" is used to describe the efforts of rural women. It is the author's and the contributors' view that rural women no more or less than urban women are interested in maintaining traditional roles and expectations. The implications that rural women are interested in maintaining a traditionally defined unequal status is inaccurate. The rigidity of the definition of "women's work" continues to limit their ability to develop themselves as whole, creative, active, equal members of their communities or society. In order for women to gain their equal and rightful place they must, however, negotiate with their husbands instead of employers, their mothers and mothers-in-law instead of other employees with more seniority, and with their friends and neighbors rather than unknown community leaders. This makes negotiations and challenges to tradition very sensitive and very personal. There are, especially in the work place of the family, no arbitration boards which can be brought in to mediate. Discrimination lawsuits would be bizzare, at best. Thus, the only recourse is to involve the minister or the social worker. The only threat is the ultimate threat of divorce.

Because of the situation in which women find themselves, community property and inheritance laws have taken on very special meanings in rural areas. With changes in the laws a woman, in North Dakota, no longer loses her means of making a livelihood because of divorce or the death of her husband. In fact, because of divorce, one of

the largest ranches in North Dakota has just recently been divided. The woman received fifteen sections (9600 acres) of land in the settlement. Also, widows are now receiving payments for farms from their adult children, just as they and their husbands would have received them if the men were still alive.

Through these new laws, wives are being recognized to be partners with their husbands and receiving fair compensation when the partnerships are dissolved. Unfortunately, the federal inheritance tax laws are not as progressed. Rural women however, are stating their case in this regard.

As men in town and on the farms begin to realize that divorce does not "just" mean losing a wife, but it also may mean losing a house, being forced to sell a business or losing half the farm, the status of women in rural areas is most certainly improving. Entering the partnership of marriage, as well as later negotiations, must be taken more seriously. The old phrase that "you can always find another woman, but a good piece of land is hard to come by" can no longer be considered truthful. Rural men must now take the concerns of their wives and mothers more seriously or lose significantly. Their women may just take that "good piece of land" with them.

Like other women, "equal compensation for comparable work", is the basic issue for rural women. When one can bargain on an equal basis for the results of their labor, equal status is close if not a reality. For rural women, the bargaining power just comes in different forms. Other issues like affirmative action, sexual harassment, equal consideration in medical services, equal responsibility for child support in cases of divorce, equal access to physical education, and many, many others are faced by rural women in the same way as urban or suburban women.

Tradition is what all women must overcome wherever they live. Like all people in a minority status position, women face societal perceptions that some people are born to have more power and status than others. These attitudes are reinforced from one generation to another and eventually become fact. The perceptions that women are of less value and should be limited in what they do is changing in rural communities. The change can be perceived to be almost rippling through the informal channels. It's a slow ripple, but changes in tradition do not often come in tidal waves.

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